

Mom's dieting can be unhealthy for kids

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ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) - Mom's dieting habits can have a bad influence on the children. Some research indicates youngsters learn attitudes about dieting through observation. For some youngsters, that might mean an unhealthy fixation on body image, experts warn. "It's like trying on Mom's high heels. They're trying on their diets, too," said Carolyn Costin, spokeswoman for the National Eating Disorder Association.

As obesity rates climb among children, health officials are warning parents about the dangers of junk food and lack of exercise. Yet few speak about parents who meticulously count every calorie that crosses their lips. That type of obsession can be just as destructive and eventually teaches kids to weigh their self-worth on the scale, said Christine Gerbstadt, spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association. While fathers also play a crucial role in shaping children's attitudes about food, research has focused primarily on women and their daughters, since females are more likely to diet and worry about body image.

One study published this year by researchers at Harvard Medical School found that frequent dieting by mothers was associated with frequent dieting by their adolescent daughters. The study also found that girls with mothers who had weight concerns were more likely to develop anxieties about their own bodies. A study in the Journal of the American Dietetic Association found that 5-year-old girls whose mothers dieted were twice as likely to be aware of dieting and weight-loss strategies as girls whose mothers didn't diet. "If their mothers diet, it's a marker of how important weight is in the household," said Alison Field, lead author of the Harvard study and an assistant professor of pediatrics.

Even small cues - such as making self-deprecating remarks about bulging thighs or squealing in delight over a few lost pounds - can send the message that thinness is to be prized above all else, Field said. "Parents, especially moms, need to understand kids watch and hear things at an early age and are like little sponges," Costin said. Walking the line between encouraging healthy habits and not making an issue of weight can be tough, especially with parents already bearing the blame for rising obesity rates among children.

The best strategy is to lead by example, Costin said: If a fad diet isn't right for the child, what makes it right for the parent? One Albany mom, Donna Choiniere, does just that. She threw dieting out the window long ago and has made fitness a part of family life. The 52-year-old runs marathons, and her 15-year-old daughter, Katelyn, is on the track team. She tries not to keep heavy-duty junk food in the house, but does not make a big deal about it, and is OK with things like pretzels and popcorn.

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